George Gittoes is an image scavenger who dares to make sense out of the dismembered emotions and tangled symbols found in the wake of war and recent terrorism. Having travelled to New York - and then to Baghdad before and after the US led forces entered the city – he unflinchingly presents the complex nature of societies on the edge of chaos – both subsiding into and emerging from moments of shattering change.

Often considered as a war artist, he does not, however focus on the conventions of documenting small day-to-day tasks and larger heroic acts against the theatrical backdrop that war so easily provides. Gittoes is rather more interested in the conditions of popular culture and generally held beliefs at the place where they collide in on their worst nightmares or where the repressed darker side erupts into view during times of stress.

This imagery is a different order of “pop art”. Instead of the focus being that of entertainment and amusement that usually celebrates our “product”-obsessed appetite - he prefers to plunge into the field of dreams that are more associated with the conditions of apocalypse. This strategy confronts the viewer with an opportunity to analyse their own beliefs and more crucially their faith in the political rhetoric and ideology that sustains the social world that we inhabit.

The particular works in this online exhibition represent a broadened approach to this field of pop culture. They offer a Tale of Two Cities – New York and Baghdad – places that are inextricably linked in a story that is far more complex than a simple comic book tussle between good and evil, black and white. It is like some ancient Greek tragedy that unfolds in our time but without any apparent heroes and with no end in sight.

This is the big mythology and the big story of our time where art, media and life blur in a strange virtual reality. There is no exit – no safe distance – no aesthetic pleasure that can deny or quell the fear of death or the high cost of change. Terror has become the common horizon to life around the globe as it now marks our sense of national identity as well as the reduction in our freedom as an individual citizen.

Gittoes began his drawing practice on the streets of New York in 1968 and here he returns to this activity of image creation. He considers the giant billboard display of the city to be like an outdoor art gallery that spits out the fears and desire of the metropolis. His sensitivity to the underlying mood is particularly sharp as he manipulates and edits his drawing and photographs as “found images” garnered out of the live theatre that are the pedestrian spaces of the city.

A similar sensibility is echoed in the haunting anticipation present on the streets of Baghdad before the arrival of the US-led coalition. Ordinary people going about their business with a similar awareness that once firm horizons are now under threat of collapse. It is not an unfamiliar or strange awareness for Australian audiences. It is now the common global experience that has rippled through the images of popular culture, media and advertising since September 11. It is the fearful concern of the human in anticipation of the overwhelming conditions of “shock and awe”. Such apocalyptic rhetoric and imagination serves to destabilise all cultures, not just that of a clearly designated enemy.

Gittoes’ practice as an artist has emerged into a new maturity with this body of work. The strategies include drawing, photography, painting and video as well as the retrieval of physical objects scrounged from the debris. They are all held together by the stories and anecdotes that demonstrate the nature of human attachment and meaning. He demonstrates the manner in which he works as an “eyewitness” artist through this collection of artistic gestures. No single medium seems
adequate for the surplus of ideas he is playing with. He implies that there is a larger canvas he is juggling with – somewhere out in the field - in front of all these raw memories.

His own reasoning for developing this role as an artist is about compassion. It is a strange word in the vocabulary of professional arts practice that is more often focused on that of self-referential irony. He comments:

If you can create in a war zone, then you are doing that in the face of incredible destruction … it is an important gesture. I have discovered from the conflicts I have covered that violence only leads to more violence. Human beings are creative. All these international situations need love, consideration and creativity… I want to spend the rest of my career doing creative work in the face of violent forces.

Gittoes is offering some sense of discernment in the midst of the blinding spectacle of images that regularly assault our sense of order and moral “decency”. At both the personal and the social level he is allowing us to refine a more compassionate eye and to thereby question the nature of image making, propaganda and illusion. This discernment is something of a response to the fatigue of seeing that marks our current situation where we are deluged by the mirrors of contemporary existence. There is too much to see – a condition that creates a visual malaise that in turn renders us blind.

In contrast to the over-rehearsed and immobilising grasp of the “spectacle” that obsessively feeds our need to be entertained, Gittoes offers the view of a compassionate eye that irritates and prompts us to see, from the ground up – to imagine the conditions of a fertile ground - with no zeroes.

View No Exit: A Tale of Two Cities in the Gallery.

Rod Pattenden is the Curator of No Exit: George Gittoes in New York and Baghdad, showing at Macquarie University Art Gallery from 22 September to 26 October 2004. He is a curator and educationalist interested in the connection between spirituality, justice and the Arts and is currently completing his PHD at the University of Sydney. He also works as Chaplain for the Uniting Church on the campus of Macquarie University.

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